



"Is she still alive?" asked a deep voice.

"Aye, still alive, Lord Omeron. She's babbling, I can't make out the words. Hyrkanian, I believe, sir. She has a bad fever, I'm afraid-can't tell how long she's had it. Pulse is still strong-that's a good sign. "

"That must be her mount over there, in that grass. Beautiful animal. Bring her along, you two. Carefully, now! Sponge her down with some cold water, that'll help her fever. Try to get some food into her."

"She wears strange armor, sir-nothing matches. She must be a mercenary. Zamoran boots, Kothian mail shirt, Hyrkanian sword-and she doesn't have a helmet. " "Just bring her along. "

"Sir, you don't think she's with-

"With that monster Du -jum and his black crew? Hardly, Sadhur. Hardly. Look at her. She's a traveler, though probably a hired sword, as you say. We can use her if she gets well. Tend her carefully, now. "

"A comely woman. "

"Aye, aye. But handy with her blade, I think. Look at the callous-pattern on her right hand; she's wielded a sword often, I'll swear! Take her along easy, now. We'll send a man back for the horse when we reach camp. And post a double watch, too, for night's coming down. "

"Du-jum won't try anything tonight, surely, not while the looting's still good in the city. "

"He'll try anything he can, Sadhur, to find us and murder us. Trust to it. Easy, now, with that girl. We've got to get her fit if we can; we'll need every sword we can muster." Shortly after sundown, Sonja awoke to voices discussing death, outrage, conquest.

So she yet lived.

She tried to sit up, but could not; her muscles would not respond. As she became more aware of herself, more awake, she realized how heavy she felt.

There were footsteps nearby. She opened her eyes more fully, shuddered as she saw looming above her a huge, armored man with scowling face and tumbling dark beard. Her instinct was to reach for her sword, spring to her feet.

Sonja tried to lurch forward, groaned, and coughed. "Are you awake?" rumbled the big man. His dark eyes studied her carefully, then he turned his face away. "She's awake, My Lord. "

Another pair of boots approached, another face appeared, this one fair-skinned, moustached, handsome-handsome beneath the metal brow of a notched war-helmet, handsome despite evident lines of ache and weariness.

"Are you awake, woman?"

Sonja shook her head to clear it, took several deep breaths, as if the aftereffects of fever could be gotten rid of as easily as a hangover.

"Here. . . . '

Strong hands gripped her upper arms to help her sit. Sonja pulled herself forward weakly, settled herself into a sitting position, and shook her head again. The world swam—a world of dusk, campfires, and torchlight. She saw crowds of armed men, and beyond them horses, supplies, more men, and more dusk.

"Where . . . ?"

"Just take it easy for a moment." The handsome man turned and gestured. "Sadhur?"

The huge, scowling warrior nodded and proffered his waterskin; the other took it, opened it, placed it to Sonja's bruised lips.

"Water. Take it down slowly. Not too much; you've been leaking sweat, you can't force it. "

But she gulped down the cold water until the man took the skin from her. Then she sat back, and the two men helped her prop herself against a tree bole for support.

"Where . . . am I?"

"In the foothills just east of Thesrad. " "Thes-rad? "

"No, you're not in Thesrad, you're in hills just beyond it. It's down there in the valley. My name is Omeron, and Thesrad is my city-state. "

"What happened? How did I-?"

"Rest easy. Do you think you can hold down some food? Yes? Sadhur, please. " As the large warrior walked off, Omeron continued, "You caught the mountain fever. You're past the worst of it now, but you're lucky you got this far. If you'd fallen in the mountains, you'd be dead by now. "

Sonja tried to recollect it. Stark and blurred memories of revolving stars, nausea, wheeling birds and moonlit trees cascaded in her mind. She looked at Omeron, focused as well as she could. He had deep blue eyes, clear and strong. Sonja

liked his eyes, felt she could trust them now. "How did you happen to find me?"

"We're renegades. " His voice became touched with bitterness. "For the past week we've been fighting for the survival of Thesrad. We were forced out, so we've taken refuge in the mountains."

"Thesrad—your city-state. " "Yes. Here's your food."

Sadhur had returned with a cracked wooden bowl; he bent and handed it to Sonja. She tried to lift her hands, could not. Omeron took it, stirred the soup in the bowl with a big wooden spoon.

"It's not much. Gruel-made from what we could take when we left Thesrad, plus what game we've been able to catch. But it's nourishing. " He offered her a spoonful; Sonja tasted it and swallowed.

"I-prefer to feed myself," she said, fumbling for the bowl.

"Sure you can handle it?" Omeron said, smiling.

She set the bowl in her lap and lifted spoon to mouth with shaking hand, dripping soup with every lift.

"Can you tell us who you are?" Omeron asked.

"Red Sonja. " She felt stronger with the first few mouthfuls. "Red Sonja, an Hyrkanian. "

"A warrior?"

"A free sword. I've been on my own all my womanhood. "

"I see. Looking for employment?"

Sonja shrugged. "I've still got some gold, unless-" She set down her spoon, reached to her belt. Her purse still hung there.

Omeron smiled knowingly. "No one took it. But, again-you're lucky robbers didn't find you in the mountains. "

She returned to her soup. In another moment, however, she was overcome with a wave of nausea and pain in her head. She dropped the bowl to the ground, spilling the gruel. "Here, Sadhur! "

"Tarim and Erlik!" Sonja grumbled feebly. "I am well! Give me a moment, it will pass. I am ... "

"You're still weak, Red Sonja. Don't fight it, you'll only make it worse. You'll feel stronger in the morning. " "But I-

"Damn it, woman, lie still and take your rest! "

Feeble anger flared in her at Omeron's tone, almost the tone of a father putting an ill child to bed. But she couldn't fight back. She felt Omeron and Sadhur lift her up, carry her nearer a fire. She lay supine, breathing, feeling the heat of the fire on her face and body, hearing the low, dull conversation of the camp.

Someone threw a blanket on her, tucked it neatly under her legs, hips, shoulders and neck. A rolled-up blanket or cape was pushed under her head as a pillow.

As she dropped back into her hot slumber, the fever in her seemed to recall a farmhouse on fire, and Omeron became her father, protecting her as both he and she, a young woman, escaped together from the holocaust. Then she fell entirely to sleep, and was visited by no more dreams.

Omeron and Sadhur took their places at a fire beside the handful of officers who had escaped with them.

"What do you think?" one of them asked his lord.

"A swordswoman for hire. " Omeron stared at the sleeping woman. "Mayhap we can recruit her."

"To fight Du-jum? Can we pay her enough to die by sorcery?"

"Perhaps she has met sorcery in her time. " Omeron continued to stare, measuring, judging, appreciating. A beautiful woman fallen into his care, a beautiful swordswoman.

"Perhaps her coming is a good omen. "

Lookouts on the mountain slope called back into camp, "Thesrad is still lighted. "

Dusk fell fully into night.

Omeron slapped his knees, stood up, then sat again. "Calm yourself," Sadhur warned him. "We will take the city back. "

"He is torturing my people!" Omeron groaned out loud. Some of the men at other fires glanced at him. All were fatigued, worn, bloody, some ill. And all felt close to their lord, their general, their master, driven out with them from their city and their home.

Omeron dug his boots into the dry soil of the mountainside and stared into the campfire. How to take it back again, against sorcery?

Sorcery, aye. But could not sorcery be fought? It was not only Du-jum, the Kushite wizard, who Omeron and his men fought. That had been bloody, violent, expected.

But Du-jum, no matter his sorcery, should never have been let inside Thesrad's gates in the first place. And he never would have, save for an act of treachery by a high-placed traitor-Omeron's wife, Yarise.

Omeron's fists knotted, the shadows deepened on his face in the blazing firelight. Yarise, his own wife, had opened the door to the sorcerer. Yarise, his wife, whom he had loved with all his heart, whom he had still considered his bride after seven years.

Yarise, strong-willed, strong-tempered, but seemingly loving and knowing and caring all at the same time.

Yarise, daughter of a dead governor of Iranistan, and also a daughter of troubled upbringing, an exile, eager for power and excitement. Why had she done it? To harm him, Omeron? He still could not believe it.

Nine months earlier, Du-jum had paid a visit to Thesrad, acting like a pilgrim. He had entertained at court, and Yarise had been fascinated by his magic.

Omeron had noticed the fascination, but had discounted the possibility that it went beyond the art to the man himself. He had been philosophical and, as in all that he did, lenient and fair. But leniency and fairness work only with those who have these same qualities within themselves. Yarise had taken advantage of her husband's openness to promote a closer relationship between herself and the Kushite wizard. She had, Omeron now realized bitterly, probably fallen in love with him on that date, and since then had worked secretly and guilefully for months, behind Omeron's back, to unlock the key to the gate that would allow Du-jum to accomplish his conquest of Thesrad.

But why? Why should Yarise chance playing traitor to her husband and to a city she already half ruled? Even granting her fascination, this was a great risk. And why should Dujum, on his part, want so much to possess this one small kingdom out of the many scores of such city-states that dotted the plains, valleys, and low mountains? Was it Yarise only that he wished? Yarise, who had admitted Du-jum, with his sorcery and his soldiers, that they might rip at Thesrad and take it and conquer it?

Every man on the mountainside knew that it was Lord Omeron's wife who had left the city open for conquest. And Omeron knew that each man, despite his loyalty and love and trust in him, had blamed him also. For leadership is not only leading in battle and in prayers, in governing and finance and law. Leadership is also knowing oneself, and those around one. At this, Omeron had failed.

The troops of Thesrad might have fought off Du-jum's sorcery and troops. But they had had no defense against their

lord-governor's own wife's treachery-against a woman who had stabbed their master in the back even as she pretended to love him.

A small city was Thesrad, with its old walls and its towering palace in the center of the main square. It was one of many small fortified cities in that vast region between the Styx and the Ibars-a dot on the landscape, primarily self-sufficient, and living an uneasy life between the great western governments and the volatile eastern kingdoms.

It was old-older than its inhabitants knew. Thesrad was only its latest name, given by a Corinthian governor a hundred years ago. Before that it was known as Akasad, and before that Kor-du'um: "empty with walls." Earlier than that, history faded and legend

took over. There were deep tunnels beneath the newer levels of the city, old catacombs, and idols buried deeply under earth falls and collapsed corridors. Thesrad's modern life was a veneer over a far older and more sinister foundation.

It was, at one time, so legend claimed, the refuge of sorcerers and dark worshippers. Aye, Thesrad held secrets in the bottom of its old belly, and Du-jum had come to carve them out.

Yarise, Mistress of Thesrad, knew this for a fact, for she had readily conspired with the sorcerer in his plan to revive the old dark forces, so that she might share in his plan to gain great power, perhaps over all the earth.

Tonight, with sections of Thesrad ablaze, with Du-jum its conquerer and the people of her city being decimated, savaged, roped into submission like chattel, and with her husband dead or escaped-none knew which-Yarise looked into her own eyes. She sat in her tower chamber in Thesrad's palace and, with the screams of slaughter wafting through her windows, examined herself carefully in her burnished silver mirror. She wondered casually if her eye shadow was too dark or if the oil lamps were betraying her, and decided finally to lighten it.

She stood up, examined herself in her full-length mirror and was pleased with herself. Tall, slim, but generously full-breasted, she had always been attractive to men and had always found pleasure in that power. Dark-haired, darkeyed, full-lipped, she knew that her beauty had not dimmed one portion with the passing years. Like her temperament, her beauty was volatile, enigmatic.

She had not yet seen Dum-jum since he had, with his army, cut a swath through the city; but she knew that when the screams finally died for the night, her dark lover would come to her and they would celebrate his conquest. Then she would pleasure a master she could truly love and respect.

For Du-jum was a great sorcerer, long-practiced; and Yarise-once the daughter of a ruler who governed a kingdom no longer in existence, once a prostitute in a Stygian brothel, once a captive in a Turanian governor's harem, and now for seven years the wife of Prince Omeron-Yarise supposed herself something of a sorceress, and had tried to teach herself magic. With some success.

She recalled that time nine months ago when, as Omeron had raised a cup of wine in toast to Du-jum's sleight-of-hand antics, she had looked into the black sorcerer's eyes, and he had looked into hers, and a promise had been made between two seekers of the transmundane.

Yarise clapped her hands. A young blond girl, the only maidservant in the chamber, hurried to her and adjusted the tiara on Yarise's head as the princess demanded.

"I am beautiful, am I not?" Yarise asked. "Very beautiful, my lady."

"Tonight is an historic night, Endi. Do you realize that?" "Yes, my lady."

"You are trembling."

More screams rose, frantic and distant, through the window. Endi trembled acutely.

"You fear the slaughter?" Yarise turned and looked deeply into her maidservant's eyes.

Endi said nothing; all was in her frightened gaze. Yarise smiled tolerantly. "You have nothing to fear, child. I am your mistress. I will protect you. You are fortunate, for you will be servant and handmaiden to a new generation of mighty wizards and rulers. Doesn't that please you?"

Nervously, Endi replied, "Y-yes . . . yes, of course."

"Doesn't it, Endi?"

"Whatever I may do . . . to serve you, my lady. . . . You know that."

"Du-jum will arrive soon. Here, Endi. " "My lady?"

"Kiss me, Endi. Am I not beautiful? My kiss will protect you. Come here. "

Uncertain, trembling with agitation, Endi took a step forward. Yarise placed her hands on the girl's shoulders and smiled widely. "Kiss me," she whispered. "I will protect you. "

Very cautiously, Endi tilted her head back and leaned forward, closed her eyes and parted her lips slightly. Sweat had sprung out on her forehead and cheeks, shimmering.

She felt a soft push from her mistress's lips, a lingering pressure. Endi, breathing nervously, smelled the scents of Yarise's perfumes and oils. . . .

And just as the soft kiss should have ended, just as Endi began to draw her face away, Yarise suddenly dug her fingers into the girl's shoulders, pulled her roughly forward, took Endi's lower lip between her teeth and bit.

Endi coughed and screamed, threw herself back, her eyes wide open with horror.

Yarise, again smiling widely, licked her white teeth. A spot of crimson gleamed on her lower lip.

Pain pulsed in Endi's mouth. She wiped her fingers frantically upon her lips, staring first at the thin streak of blood on her hand, then at her mistress, again at her fingers. . . . She mewed softly with pain.

"A blood-kiss," Yarise purred. "I have tasted your blood, child. That is strong magic. Now you are protected. " Endi began to weep; the pain was intense and throbbing. She wanted to run away, but long discipline held her where she stood, a mistreated servant awaiting whatever else her mistress demanded of her.

Yarise's tone mellowed, her eyes softened. "Go, now, Endi. Clean yourself up. You are protected, now. "

Endi coughed, shook her head once and ran from the chamber, choking back sobs.

Yarise returned to her mirror, studied herself in the light of the oil lamps, and with one finger began to rub the spot of blood into her lips, darkening and moistening them so that they looked very red, adding to her beauty.

Guarded by his soldiers-black-skinned mercenaries, outcasts, wastrels in armor-Du-jum stood as a dark, glistening shadow in the fiery dusk. He was tall, muscular, with burning white eyes full of hatred. He had scars on his forehead and cheeks and neck, scars remaining even from those long-ago days when he was not a sorcerer, not a general or a conquerer, but only another man's slave, the pawn of another man's wishes and actions.

"Today the world bows to my wishes, " he muttered darkly, "to my actions! "

He listened to the city's screams, and knew he was responsible for them. The screams were as a lusty woman's lovegroans to him. High around his dark form, flames leaped and twisted skyward from the tops of apartments and temples, and billows of black smoke funneled upward to blot the stars. Bodies surrounded him; armored piles of them, torn and twisted: the bodies of Thesrad's last defenders. Women shrieked, children wailed. The fires glowed, and Du-jum's sullen-faced soldiers trooped through the streets.

"I am my own deed," he growled to the night. "I, Dujum! "

He had suffered; now he would make others suffer. He had wanted; now he would make others want. He had known violence; now others would know blood, fire, and steel. Revenge was sweet, and though long ago he had had his revenge for the scars on his back and forehead, cheeks and throat, he had not lost his taste for it.

Besides, there was power, achievement, conquest-these mattered even more. Small men dream but remind themselves that, after all, they only dream. Great men dream and forge those dreams into their own futures.

Du-jum breathed it in, his Destiny. His armor was not bloody; he carried a sword, but it was ceremonial, decorative. His deadliness lay in things of greater strength than physical weapons; his yellow-burning eyes betrayed the sorcery that was in his very nerves and veins. His dark robe, his sword and iron breastplate all bore symbols of necromantic import, and his gleaming cranium was shaven as completely as any

Stygian priest's. An ugly carved bird dangled on a golden cord about his neck, and his long-fingered right hand gripped a tall scepter carved from greenish stone. It was a serpent scepter, decorated with glyphs and cartouches,

topped with a jewel-inlaid serpent's head opened in a rigid hiss, fangs showing, tongue protruding.

The bird was Du-jum's, for he was a worshipper of Urmu, the Vulture God; the scepter, he had stolen.

The rioting quieted, and as Du-jum waited, the fires began to die down. His soldiers, those not on patrol, collected about him. All bore his mark on their foreheads—a deep "v" which he had made himself with sharp, long fingernails.

Then, his waiting done, Du-jum turned and raised his arms. He stood upon the front portico of an old, long-ignored building of dark stone, in a quarter of Thesrad taken over long ago by prostitutes, pimps, thieves, and murderers. The building was once a temple, but for many years had been used only as a combination of whorehouse, flophouse, tavern, and dive.

"The blasphemers inside have been routed and slain!" Du-jum thundered. "Now let their blood flow from their carcasses in the name of Urmu, the Vulture. Let his altars drink anew!"

His yellow eyes glared up at the temple's cornices where, ignored by the passing generations of Thesrad, huge stone vultures hunched, wings spread, overlooking the city, which, long ago, had been controlled by priests and sorcerers of the Vulture.

Du-jum raised his long arms again; he clenched his fists. His soldiers quieted; the city beyond still moaned. "Urmu!" he intoned, his voice ringing out like the sound of a brazen gong. "Urmu! Kadulu imest!"

His soldiers began to sweat, to murmur, then grew quiet once more.

"Urmu! Live again! Your power is revived! The city sheds blood for you, Urmu! I have conquered for you! The day is dark once more, Urmu!"

A wind grew from the sky, blew down. The full moon, shielded by wisps of cloud, suddenly shone free. The wind rose to a howl, making torches flicker; the soldiers' capes and armor lacings fluttered and whipped.

Du-jum's great black cloak wrapped around him, flapping.

"Urmu! Kidesh kidera! Rise, Vulture! Rise, wings of darkness! Behold with thy far-seeing eyes—the carpet of blood is laid before your feet! The prey of sacrifice is placed before your beak. Your magic lives again, O Urmu!"

The wind swept down; the fires flared again.

"Urmu! Show us your sign! Confirm us in our conquest! We worship you with magic and blood, we await your sign, O Urmu!"

A shriek suddenly came from within the old temple. Du-jum turned, still holding his hands high, and looked into the shadowed recesses. There were hurried footsteps, another shriek. A maniac face appeared, white, wild-eyed, and an arm holding up a knife. The madman paused for an instant in the open foyer of the temple.

"Dogs!" he screeched. "Dogs! Do you take Thesrad? Dogs!"

Then he rushed out, onto the portico, a knife upraised to stab the sorcerer.

Du-jum laughed.

The wind suddenly rose to a whistling shriek, and high above, one of the vulture statues rocked, dislodged bits of grit and loose mortar, tilted, and plummeted, straight down. "Do-o-gss!" screamed the madman.

Du-jum laughed again as, only three paces from him, the maniac was abruptly struck down by the falling statue. A huge thud—a loud crunching and snapping—and the man was crushed instantly against the flags of the portico.

A great pool of blood and brains oozed from beneath the fallen vulture. The bird was cracked and broken, but its stone beak was painted dark red with the blood of sacrifice.

Du-jum's laughter boomed. His soldiers, intoxicated with fanatical ecstasy, screamed out to the sky: "Urmu! Urmu!" The wind died out, the moans still rose from the city, and Du-jum, howling maniacally, led his chorus of soldiers again and again and again in the same resounding chant: "Urmu! Urmu! Urmu!" At last, it was replaced by another: "Du-jum! Du-jum! Du jum!"

The moon was waning when he finally left the temple of Urmu and was escorted by his soldiers to the main palace. As he entered, flourishing his great cloak, his soldiers who stood guard bowed and saluted. Slaves scampered before him, heads low, showing him the way to Omeron's chamber. Yarise was waiting for him there.

Du-jum entered. His guards pulled shut the door, remaining outside.

Silence, save for the whisper of the torches in the room. Yarise stood wide-eyed, proud, expectant. Du-jum tilted his head slightly to her and smiled gravely.

She reacted as though in the presence of a god: adoring, worshipful, approaching him with careful, soft steps, face tilted up, fingers dancing nervously on the air to touch him, yet poised to pull back instantly if the intensity of his glow should burn like flame.

Du-jum reached out his arms and laughed his booming, maniacal laugh.

Yarise threw herself at him, kissed him passionately, held him, stared into his burning eyes, held him again, crushing her breasts against his armor and the hideous bird on his chest, rubbing her face against his with wild exuberance. "I am yours!" she breathed. "The city is ours, Dujum-Ours! Ours! And I am yours!"

The screams, the cries, still came faintly through the window. Winds whistled. Soldiers tramped and marched. "Yours, Du-jum! After this long wait!"

"A night of vengeance and shadows! " growled the dark sorcerer. "A night of blood and fire and stone vultures, and now-" He lifted Yarise easily in his mighty arms. "A night of power and conquest and ecstasy! "

Yarise returned his gloating smile as she was carried to her bed-to Omeron's bed.